Robin Hood sent the Norman retainer staggering backward.

SWEET LIBERTY OR DEATH !

HOW ROBIN FITZOOTH DEFIED THE NORMANS AND BECAME A HERO TO THE PEOPLE!

Sweet Liberty or Death!

CHAPTER 1

Robin Defies the Normans

IT WAS A May Day during the reign of Richard I. In the heart of those truly immense forests, extending with scarcely a break through Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, and still further on into the wilds of Yorkshire and Cumberland, the oak, monarch of the woods, stood side by side with the delicate-coated stem and pendent branches of the silver birch, so appropriately called the "lady of the woods." Immense elms, red beeches, stately larches, lifted their leafy crests, forming a beautiful harmony of colour in the flashing sunlight.

Underfoot the turf was as of velvet, with here and there vast undergrowth of climbing honeysuckle, black and white bryony, clematis, prickly holly, heather, foxglove, and delicate green ivy. Here in this leafy paradise roved countless herds of noble stags with lofty antlers. Here martens, hares, rabbits, and wing game abounded, and here at eventide the timid deer stole tremblingly down to the crystal pools to drink. In those

days they had a worse enemy than man to contend with, for packs of savage, red-eyed wolves hunted the wilds for their prey.

But all was at peace on this lovely afternoon. The breeze brought with it the fragrance of flowers and the laughter of the bubbling streams, where the trout rose to the myriads of flies and grew fat and lazy in their security.

Through one of the beaten paths of Sherwood Forest a lad and maiden walked. A fairer couple, or more fitly matched by nature, the land did not hold than young Robin Fitzooth and Marian, the child of a Saxon forester who had met his fate at the hands of the Norman tyrants.

Her clear blue eyes sat enshrined beneath arches of brown eyebrows, and her profuse, brown plaited hair was a blending of gold and flax. She wore a light-fitting bodice of rough material, and a kirtle of green homespun short enough to give her feet and ankles full play.

Robin was dressed in a tunic of forest green, slightly furred at the throat. At his back he wore a long yew bow and a quiver of arrows. In his belt a hunting knife, half-sheathed, gleamed, and in his right hand he carried a boar spear.

His long hose were of a lighter green than his tunic; his boots, tightly strapped and laced over his insteps, were brown, carefully tanned, and prepared to resist the damps of the forest, ay, and the thorns and clinging brambles, too, for a forester had no time to pay heed to such things when engaged in the chase, on his skill depended his food. On the quickness of his eye, the strength of his arm, and on his unwavering courage, depended his very life.

Following close behind Marian and Robin came two, splendid stag-hounds named Hector and Vulcan. Big fellows were they, quite as tall as their young master when they stood on their hind legs.

Robin's face wore an expression of deep thought and anger, and now and then Marian placed her hand pleadingly on his arm as she raised her soft, eloquent, eyes to his.

Just cause had Robin for being angry, for the edict had gone forth that the foresters' hounds, on whom so much depended, should be maimed, in accordance with the words of the old law. Here are the exact words:

“Three claws of the fore-feet shall be cut off by the skin by setting one of the dog’s fore-feet upon a piece of wood eight inches thick and a foot square, and then setting a chisel of two inches breadth upon the three claws of the dog’s fore-feet, and striking them off with a mallet at one blow. And this is the manner of laming dogs so that they may not hunt or hurt the deer or other beasts of the chase.”

“Think of it!” Robin cried suddenly, his voice ringing with fury. “By the mass! think of it, Marian! What next will the tyrants do? What new cruelty will enter their minds? Poor Hector! Poor Vulcan! It shall never be.”

“But what will your father say to the men who will come to do this work?” Marian asked.

“Leave my father to deal with the tyrants,” Robin replied. “Robin Fitzooth, whose name I am proud to bear, is a freeman. He has some power even among these Normans, who scruple not to lay their thievish fingers on all they fancy. The yoke of serfdom has never rested on the shoulders of Fitzooth, and never will. Since William the Norman conquered this fair land of ours have his barons ground us Saxons down with cruel treatment and unjust taxes. Of our birthright e’en would they rob us; but still are there Saxon men of Sherwood who will never bend before the tyrants. And yet,” he added, glancing over his shoulder, “I wish in my heart that I had not left our home. My father has a faithful henchman in Will Scarlet, and there are men, too, ready to fly to his assistance; but—”

“If your mind is ill at ease,” Marian interposed, “leave Hector and Vulcan with me.”

“Return and see how matters are proceeding, Robin dearest. Your father has been ever gentle and kind to the orphan child of his dead friend; but he is a man of stern temper. With him it is often the blow before the word is spoken, and his passionate nature might lead him into trouble.”

Robin seemed to scarcely hear what the girl said.

“I thank Heaven!” he cried, lifting his clenched hand, “that my mother did not live to suffer the darkness of these days. She was of gentle blood, Marian, ay, and gentle in every way. Is not my father the Earl of Huntingdon?

“Was not the title stolen from him? Were not his fair lands filched from him, and this poor forest home given him in exchange? And now, forsooth, this Oswald de Burgh, sheriff of Nottingham, must command my father to bring forth his hounds, that they shall be lamed. By St. Dunstan! the day may be near or distant, but this Norman who takes care to keep his carcase in full armour shall reckon with me!”

“Go back! Leave the hounds with me,” Marian urged. “My mind misgives me.”

“So will I,” Robin replied. “Stay here, Marian, until I return. Take my bow and quiver, and pierce the body of the first man that attempts to molest you. But Hector and Vulcan will protect you.”

So saying, the young Saxon bounded away, blaming himself that he had listened to his father and set out with the hounds.

Fitzooth’s house was of a most primitive style, low of roof, heavily thatched, and the walls composed entirely of timber. At the back were the stables, and byres for cows, and a covered straw-yard for cattle. Beyond was a clearing of sweet pasturage, and at the end the garden which supplied the Saxon and his small household with vegetables.

There was no smoke coming through the hole in the roof which served for a chimney, nor could Robin see anyone near.

The young forester was not surprised at that. Of thieves Fitzooth had no fear, for he gave too liberally to all who came to his door, and no poor wayfarer was ever turned away.

The old dame who did the drudgery of the household might be in the forest, which grew up to the very front of the house. Will Scarlet, the young henchman, was away, too, and no living thing was in sight but a deerhound puppy, sitting upon its haunches and whimpering rather dismally.

But as Robin advanced he was confronted by a stalwart forest ranger—one of the men whom the Normans employed to enforce their cruel forest laws, which forbade the Saxons to kill the deer and game which was rightly theirs. The man clanked heavily out of the house, and, frowning at Robin, said:

“What means this skulking? Where is your father?”

“My father,” Robin replied, “goes when he pleases, and asks no man where his feet shall tread. If you seek our hounds, to maim them, they are beyond your reach, and will so remain.”

The ranger laughed scornfully and snapped his fingers.

“I came to tell Fitzooth that it is the will of Oswald de Burgh, lord and sheriff of Nottingham, that this part of the forest must be tenanted no longer. Within seven days Fitzooth must find another habitation, and take with him such goods as he lawfully possesses.”

“Where?” demanded Robin, catching at his breath.

“That is his business, not mine,” the ranger responded. “Deliver my lord and master’s message, and tell your father that no idle excuse will be listened to. He must go.”

“Stay! I must have a word with you,” said Robin, choking with rage. “Why did not Oswald de Burgh come himself? Warrant my father would have found an answer for him. And as to what goods he may have left, by my faith, the sheriff of Nottingham might carry them all in the hollow of his hand, and ask another thief to dip.”

“Insolent hound!” the ranger cried. “When I come again, I will have you tied to a tree and flogged until you cry for mercy.”

“Such a whip is not made for your hand to crack!” Robin retorted. “Get you gone, or, by St. Dunstan! I will teach you a lesson in flogging!”

So saying, Robin twisted the ranger round, and, thrusting him from the house, passed in.

“Now by the bones of William, who brought the dirty Saxons to their knees, I’ll take one of your ears back with me to Nottingham!” the ranger roared, drawing his sword.

Robin saw his danger, and, snatching up a quarter-staff, ran out to meet his enemy.

“I’ll not soil good steel with such blood as yours!” he cried; “but I’ll trounce you well, and let your bruises be the reply of the Fitzooths, father and son, to your dog of a master! Hoy! hoy! where is your skill, boastful Norman? Come, here are my ears; take them!”

Shouting defiantly. Robin struck the ranger’s long sword from his hand, and then, laying on with a will, beat him over his head and shoulders until he howled for mercy.

“Now, away with you to Nottingham” said Robin scornfully, “and when you come again, bring a smoother tongue with you, or methinks you will lose it.”

The ranger, bruised and battered, crawled to where he had tethered his horse, deep amid the trees, and, dragging his aching limbs painfully into the saddle, rode away.

“Now to return to Marian, and me thinks it would be wise to keep her company until eventide,” Robin said.

MARIAN WAS MUCH distressed at the news Robin brought her, yet she could but applaud his action.

“Robin, they will seek to take your life,” she said.

“That I am prepared for,” he replied. “At the worst, I must leave my father’s roof for a time, and live in the foresters’ cave that we know of, and, be the chase ever so hot, I have sense enough to outwit the tyrants.”

“But your father—”

“They will not harm him, but wreak their vengeance on me,” Robin replied. “Come, dry your eyes and listen, Marian. As I said, my father has some power, and will lose no time in laying his grievance before the king, and soon too, for it has gone forth that Richard the Lion-Hearted will visit the forest ere long. So be of good heart. Come, we will sit us down and see what Dame Margery was good enough to put in my wallet.”

They ate and drank, Marian sparingly and without appetite, for her heart was sad; but she kept her tears back and tried to look brave.

And soothe time wore on until the shadows fell and the bright-eyed stars peeped out of their bed of deepening blue.

“It is time that we returned,” Robin said. “Give me your hand, Marian. Why, girl, you are trembling e’en now. To heel, Hector! Steady, Vulcan! What ails the hounds? They scent something more than game.”

At that moment there came the winding of a horn through the forest.

“Will Scarlet sounded those notes, I’ll swear,” Robin said; “and yet there was a break in them, as though he ran with the horn to his lips. Marian, how pale you are!”

“My heart sickens,” the girl said, clasping her brew. “Robin, I fear your quarrel with the ranger has brought serious mishap to the noblest and best of men. How shall we forgive ourselves?”

“Tush! tush! You think like a woman and talk like a woman. Courage. Something has happened, no doubt, and I will hasten to meet Will Scarlet. But as to my father, I tell you that he is well able to hold his own.”

Again the horn sounded, and then, amid a crashing of branches, Will Scarlet appeared.

He was a handsome young fellow. His dress, at the best of times, was of a rougher material than Robin’s, but now it was in rags, for he had sped like a deer, in spite of a great ugly wound on his left cheek, through broke and brier.

His long, flowing hair, too, was matted and wild, and his right arm, hastily bandaged, hung limp and useless at his side.

“Oh, Robin, my young master!” he cried, dropping on one knee out of sheer exhaustion, “blame me not for turning my back on the bloodthirsty hirelings! I fought until my good sword lay in splinters about me; I fought until so gashed and stabbed that my life seemed to be ebbing away. Ay, and I fought until I saw the homestead in flames, and your father—”

“Yes, what of him?” Robin exclaimed.

“The churls—the villains—hanged him over his own door,” Will Scarlet replied. “They held me, the brutes, while they did it. When the cruel rope was placed about his neck, your father turned to me, saying: ‘Seek out my son. To Heaven and him I leave revenge.’ And then, when they had dragged up his poor body, I wrenched myself away and came on.”

Robin reeled as if the steel head of the boar spear he held had turned and struck him to the heart.

A mist gathered before his eyes, strange sounds rang in his ears, and the earth swam under his feet.

“My father dead—hanged, and for a deed of mine!” he gasped, staggering against a tree. “His home, my home—burned. How did this

happen? What brought it about? Speak, and speak out; for, see, I am myself again."

"Oswald de Burgh sent men," Will Scarlet replied. "They came, a score in number and armed to the teeth. It was not to clip the hounds, Robin, that they came, but to take revenge on the good franklin, because you had thrashed a ranger. I saw murder in their eyes and begged your father to flee into the forest, but he would not. Stern of face, and with haughty brow, he met them, and then—Oh, horror! It is death to me to recall the scene!"

"It is before my eyes," Robin said, with unnatural calmness. "My poor Will! You are much hurt; but you may be well proud of your wounds. Marian!"

The girl had sunk on the sward, and was sobbing as though her heart would break.

"Marian," Robin continued, "there will be time for tears when deeds are done. Dry your eyes and put aside the girl, as I now put away my youth. I am no longer a boy, but a man, with one thought, one determination—revenge. Here, by my faith, I swear it. For this base act Oswald de Burgh shall suffer! Walls have not been built that shall keep me from him, nor dungeons so deep that can keep him from my sight!"

"Robin! Robin!" Marian exclaimed piteously, "this cannot be true! It must be some horrid dream, from which we shall awake presently."

"Awake, yes," Robin replied. "Look at poor Will! Every drop of blood that has been drawn from his veins by the biting steel of these Norman ghouls shall by them be accounted for. But tell me, Scarlet, are the murderers still hovering near the poor old homestead, gloating over the dead body of their victim?"

"Methinks not," Will Scarlet rejoined. "As I fled from the glade, which your father had helped with his own hands to clear, I glanced across my shoulder and saw the butchers moving away. But have a care, Robin Fitzooth, Earl of Huntingdon. As they feared and hated the father, so they hate and fear the son."

The young man thrust the words aside with an impatient gesture.

"Robin Fitzooth no longer. Henceforth I take my mother's maiden name, and shall be known to all that love me as Robin Hood. Take heed

of it, Will, and you, too, Marian, for I will answer to no other; and, mark me, I have a deep reason for it."

As he spoke he opened a wallet at his side, and taking from it some strips of fine linen and a box of healing salve, without which no hunter in those days went abroad, he knelt at Will Scarlet's side and bound up his wounds with great skill and infinite tenderness.

"There, now," he said, "you will feel more comfortable presently. It is well to be guarded against surprises, for I am powerless to do anything but nurse my revenge at present. We will hide until night flings her mantle over the forest, and then we will return to the home of desolation and death. Lean on my shoulder, honest Will, and fear not to lean too heavily; and you, too, Marian, take his arm. Come, come! To heel, Hector! To heel, Vulcan! You are poor, dumb, senseless creatures, so they say, but I vow that you shall have a share in the work I have set my hand, my brain, and my heart to. Come! Let us go! I know of a cave where we can hide in security."

WHEN THE SUN went down in glory of crimson, purple, and gold, his consort, the crescent moon, with her train of glistening stars, came forth. And the wind hushed its voice, and the trees stood silent, and watched the wonders of the deep blue canopy above their leafy heads.

And soon the waning moon, leaving the sky to her faithful sentinels, looked down upon the smoking ruins of a once happy home.

Near where the door had stood there lay the dead father, and at his side knelt the son, his lips pressed upon the face in which the warmth of life would never glow again.

But soon Robin rose and, answering to his soft call, Will Scarlet, Marian, and the hounds stole out of the shadows.

"My father was ever thoughtful," Robin said. "He seemed to foresee the end, and buried his treasure, and told me where I should find it, if aught happened to deprive me of him. Down, almost beneath where we stand, lie three caskets, one filled with broad gold pieces, another brimming with silver, and the third containing heirlooms and the gems which in happier days bedecked my mother. Alack! all is mine now, and

it is time that we set about securing the wealth, which I promise to make good use of."

Throwing aside a. charred beam, and kicking aside a heap of rubbish, Robin revealed a staircase. At the base of it was a narrow passage, and halfway down it Robin halted and, pressing his hand along the wall, began to count:

"One—two—three—four—five!"

A piece of solid masonry gave a half-revolution, as though working on a pivot, and Robin, thrusting his arm through the aperture, brought out the three caskets.

But there was more to come—a helmet, a beautifully chased breastplate, armor for the arms and thighs, a gold-hilted sword, and a shield.

All these things Robin brought up, handing some to Will Scarlet and a few of the lighter articles to Marian.

"Back to the cave," Robin said. "But where are our friends—our true Saxon friends who have been with us against the haughty Norman? The news of this dastardly outrage must have reached them. Why have they not hastened to our side? Where is the good Friar Tuck, Little John, and Much, the miller's son, whom I saved from being gored to death by a stag? Have they all deserted us?"

"Rest in peace as to that," Will Scarlet replied. "They may be within earshot even now for all I know. Perhaps it is just as well, for your sake, Robin Hood, that they have kept out of sight."

"Even so," said Robin. "Come, then! Marian, you are so pale and weak. Sweetheart I call you henceforth. When you were at my father's house, I held you as a sister. Sister no longer, but lover, an in me you shall find a true and faithful swain."

"What!" Robin said, drawing her closer to him, "will you give no answer to my avowal?"

"Robin," she responded softly, "I have always loved you, and I always will. Be satisfied."

The cavern, afterwards to be known as Robin Hood's Cavern, lay beneath a number of tremendous oaks, from which, perchance, the

bearded Druids had culled the mystic mistletoe with silver sickles beneath the light of the moon.

It was approached by intricate paths, forming a maze, the secret of which was known by but a few. It was sanctuary of the free men of Sherwood Forest who refused to bend the knee to the tyrant Normans, and the cave had been fitted up with great care.

Along the sides were benches, and here and there a rudely constructed chair. Lamps hung from the ceiling, through which the roots of the trees protruded in some places.

A table capable of seating a score of persons ran down the middle, and of drinking-horns, plates, and cooking utensils there was a plenty.

Moreover, the cave was always kept provisioned; and to guard against sudden surprise, in a huge chest, half-buried in the earth, but kept perfectly dry, there was a goodly stock of bows, arrows, hunting-knives, axes, and spearheads.

The entrance of this wonderful retreat was concealed by a curtain of trailing plants, the growth of years, and so thick that it took a strong man to move it on one side.

The largest of all the lamps had been left burning, and as the fugitives entered their shadows danced weirdly before them. Will Scarlet drew some wine from a butt, and Maid Marian placed some dried venison and unleavened bread on the table.

They had eaten nothing for several hours, and all three were famished.

"Tomorrow," Maid Marian said, "I promise you, a better fare. I will be astir early, and go where the sweet herbs grow, and—"

"Hush!" whispered Robin Hood, putting his hand to his ear. "Someone approaches."

He strung his bow in a moment, and set an arrow to the string, while Will Scarlet, clutching a boar spear, crept towards the mouth of the cave.

Then, in spite of himself, Robin Hood began to laugh.

"It is Friar Tuck," he said. "Listen to him. Good luck! He has brought Little John with him. Hark to the thunder of the child's voice."

"Robin! Robin!" cried a mellow voice, "where are you, boy? By the bones of St. Nicholas, I am a jelly, a mass of pulped marrow! My flesh is

full of thorns! There was not a bramble or nettle by the way that did not catch at me. A murrain on all the prickly and stinging things i' the forest! Had it not been for this good steel-shod staff, I'd have fallen a hundred times, and died like a frog choked with mud. An' you would not carry me, Little John."

"By my faith!" quoth a deep, rolling bass voice, "when the Holy Church imposes on me such a penance as to carry a mountain of flesh, I'll have done with it. But, silence, friar—silence. Your wagging tongue gives discord enough to make a mole open its eyes wide and stare."

Uttering a glad cry, Robin Hood threw down his bow and ran forward to welcome the newcomers, both of whom were trusted friends—two Saxons who hated the Norman yoke.

First there came Friar Tuck, a man of medium height, exceedingly plump, closely shaven and shorn, garbed in brown, and girdled with a knotted rope. His face was jolly and round, his eyes blue and sparkling, and his button-shaped nose shone like a chestnut newly burst from its shell.

Close behind him was Little John, so-named in playful allusion to his enormous height. He was a giant standing nearly seven feet in his hose. He was bluff, bearded, and good-natured, tender-hearted, sympathetic with the poor; but when roused to anger he was a perfect tornado of fury, and had been known to pick up a forest ranger and throw him fully twenty feet distant.

He was dressed in. dark green, wore a red feather in his cap, and his belt bristled with weapons, amongst which was a bright axe with a curved handle.

When Will Scarlet and Maid Marian had added their share to the welcoming, Robin Hood said:

"You have heard?"

"The worst," Friar Tuck replied, rolling himself on a bench and panting for breath. "Think you that such a deed could be unknown? Why, the very trees whispered of it, and, I tell you, Robin, that we are but the advance guard of men who have sworn to avenge your father's base murder."

"That is true enough," Little John chimed in, running his horny thumb along the edge of his axe. "Our friends could do nothing to prevent the deed. Some were tilling the ground, some hunting, others fishing, when these Normans swooped down upon him we loved. When the news spread they stood aghast with rage and horror, and many will there be to help you to a just vengeance."

"Give me food; give me drink!" interrupted Friar Tuck. "Never a man suffered as I did during that ten miles' tramp. By the rood, how that baby strode along and led me where the thorns grew inches long!"

"Harken to him!" sneered Little John in pretended anger. "I give you my word that on the way he devoured a cold capon, half a gammon of bacon, and washed them down with two full quarts of the juice of the grape, thickened with mead. But, enough of folly. Others are in our footprints. Behold, they come!"

Pulling the mass of trailing plants aside, as though it were a piece of flimsy lace, Little John pointed to some forms growing out of the darkness.

Shadowy at first, they soon developed into the persons of more than a score of foresters. Splendid men all, with "yards" of yew—longbows that were the height of the man who bore it, of prodigious strength, and capable of sending an arrow half a mile—short swords, and hunting-knives, and hunting-horns slung behind by cords over their shoulders.

In silence they saluted Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and in the silence of the stalwart fellows there was eloquence and sympathy deeper than words could express.

No sooner were all in the cavern than Friar Tuck displayed wonderful agility.

Although almost as round as a ball, he leaped to his feet, and then on the table.

"Men of Sherwood," he cried, "words would be wasted on you to tell what has happened this day. But 'tis enough to stir you afresh against your oppressors. Of your own free will you have come, not only to condole with Robin, but to appoint him your chief. Do I speak in good sooth?"

Every man raised his right hand aloft.

“You could give me no better answer,” Friar Tuck replied. “Robin will be your chief. Let these be your passwords and your war cry: ‘Sweet Liberty or Death!’”

“Sweet Liberty or Death!” they repeated.

“And who shall be chief henchman to Robin?”

Robin Hood stepped forward.

“Good Friar Tuck, and friends all,” he said, “I bow to the honor you have conferred on me. As to chief henchman, let there be none. I look to all of you, from Will Scarlet, ever faithful, to the man who is almost a stranger to me. We have one object in view—vengeance. Vengeance, not only for the murder of my poor father; but the time has come to show these Norman tyrants that they must look to meaner men for submission. Tonight, if it please you, I will lead you forth.”

A shout of joy rose to the roof of the cavern, and Little John, fixing his cap on his spear, whirled it round and round until it made a man feel giddy to look at it.

“As for me,” said Friar Tuck, “I, being a man of peace, appoint myself steward of the larder.”

The foresters roared with laughter.

“By the rood, he a man of peace!” cried Little John. “Not many days have passed since I saw him break the skull of a ranger with a quarter-staff.”

“Child John!” quoth the friar, drooping the corners of his mouth, “is not well of you to tell this to our friends. I am but human, and when the Norman called me a big barrel of fat, and thrust me under the ribs with his staff, I thought I might be forgiven if I taught him not to be so glib with his tongue, nor so ready with his sapling of oak. But, enough. Robin, ‘tis time we were on our journey.”

There were few arrangements to make, and little time was cut to waste. Each man drank a horn of wine, and clasped Robin’s hand as a sign of their devotion, and two were appointed to act as sentinels and to guard Marian.

Will Scarlet, much to his disgust, was also left behind, in consequence of his weakness, and busied himself in making a leafy screen to form a kind of apartment for Marian at the end of the cave.

"Sweetheart," Robin said, kissing her, "fear not for me. Heaven will strengthen my arm against the foe. My father's spirit has fallen upon me; even as in the days of old the prophet's mantle fell. Sleep well and in peace. Ere the sun breaks through the mists of the eastern sky, I hope to bring you news—such news as the child of a brave man loves.

"Men of Sherwood Forest, I am ready. Sweet Liberty or Death!"

CHAPTER 2

Guy of Gisborne is Taught a Lesson

THE LEADER OF the marauders, who had burnt and sacked Robin Hood's home and put his father to a shameful death was a cruel Norman named Guy of Gisborne.

This man was well fitted for the task which was carried out so brutally. Guy of Gisborne was a man of substance, the bosom friend of Oswald-de Burgh, sheriff of Nottingham, and he owned, or rather had stolen, a considerable tract of the forest.

This he fenced in with pointed stakes, and built himself a stronghold, near which lived his retainers, a base crew, bowing to their master's cruel will.

These wretches had not forgotten to filch the murdered man's cattle and horses, and at the very time that Robin Hood and his men were planning a campaign of reprisals the Normans were eating, drink-ing, and making exceedingly merry over the spoil.

And Guy of Gisborne sat in their midst, boasting how he would flay the skin from young Robin's back and put all Saxons to the sword.

These sentiments were applauded to the echo by his followers, who with loosened belts, and lying in grotesque attitudes, had given themselves up to the revelry of the night.

BUT LET US return to Robin Hood and his stalwart bowmen.

Some sped on in advance to harness the horses they possessed, but Robin elected to proceed on foot, although he could send an arrow with unerring aim when mounted barebacked, or in the saddle.

A comical old donkey, with very long ears, and as obstinate as was ever ass, was provided for Friar Tuck.

"Balaam, my friend," quoth the jolly monk, who was in the height of his glory, "show me no tricks with your heels this night, or I will so belabour your hide with my quarter-staff that it shall seem on fire. Bray and I will stop your jaws with hemlock."

"The master and his beast are excellent company," said Little John. "The only difference is that one's ears are shorter than the other's."

"For that," retorted Friar Tuck, "you shall feed on bread and drink naught stronger than water for forty days."

"That will I, if you go not out of my sight and keep time with me," said Little John. "Ho, ho! It tickles me to fancy what shape you would be at the end of forty days—a badly-filled sack of corn tied in the middle, a pudding which has burst in the cloth, a dream of a toad that some great weight has fallen upon."

"Roar away, blustering wind-bag!" cried Friar Tuck, laughing, too. "I'll have you on the hip someday, big as you are."

Then silence fell on all. Men and horses trod so lightly that their footfalls were scarcely audible, and they seemed scarcely to breathe as they drew nearer and nearer to Guy of Gisborne's stronghold.

Much, the miller's son, a slim, active young fellow skilled in archery and in the use of arms, and whose no vain boast it was to say that he could jump his own height, was sent forward with Dick Driver to reconnoiter.

About ten feet apart those two crawled through the long grass, stopping every now and then to flatten their ears on the ground. They had learned to imitate the squeak of the bat, the hoot of the owl, and the screech of the night-jar, and by such means they carried on a kind of conversation.

In the meantime such of the foresters as had brought horses dismounted and tethered the animals loosely to trees, and the patient brutes, trained to obey the slightest sign from their masters, stood like statues. Friar Tuck was not quite so sure of Balaam, and kept his hand firmly upon the donkey's muzzle.

It gave the corpulent friar, used as he was to surprises, quite a shock when Much, the miller's son and Dick Driver started up almost at his feet.

"What news?" Robin Hood demanded, under his breath.

"They are carousing," Much replied, "and making very merry. As nearly as I can judge
they number fifty."

"In that case the odds will be on our side," Robin rejoined. "Now to find a way in; and then will we show them the way out. Where is Little John?"

"What, don't you know me from the branchless trunk of a tree?" demanded the giant. "I'll deal with the fence. Follow me, and pass the word for the men to keep close order."

"Oh, dear me," moaned Friar Tuck, rolling up his eyes. "Here is a fix for a man of peace to be in. If I fall, Robin, see that my poor body is carried to the monastery, and tell the good abbot—"

"That your last act was to strike a blow for freedom," Little John interposed with a grunt. "Peace, old man, and when we come to close quarters, see that you use your quarter-staff." So saying, the giant strode up to the fence of painted stakes, and raising himself on tip-toe looked over.

Guy of Gisborne, never dreaming of an attack, had not thought it necessary to post sentinels, and while he was planning a hunt through the forest, and painting a pleasant picture of what he would do to Robin, the latter's sturdy companion, Little John, was quickly pulling the fence down with the greatest ease.

At last room was made for four men to pass in abreast, and Robin Hood, with his bow strung and a sharp, double-edged sword in his right hand. marched up to the stronghold and knocked boldly at the door.

“Yet another comer!” cried Guy of Gisborne. “Merkyn, see who is there. If a friend, use him well; but the gods send me an enemy that we may have sport.”

Merkyn went to the door, and opening an iron grill, demanded who came at such an hour.

“Tell your master that it’s the son of Robin Fitzooth, and that I would have audience with him.”

The Norman retainer was so astonished at this reply that he could scarcely find breath to deliver the message.

“By Pluto, he is a bold stripling to beard me in my den,” Guy of Gisborne said, unsheathing his sword and leaning his chin on the hilt. “He is courting death, and perchance will challenge me to combat. Poor fool! But let him come in. I like a beast that fights gamely. Open the door.”

“But, my lord,” said Merkyn, “how did he enter the enclosure? I chained and barred the gates myself.”

“What matter that, dunderheaded loon!” exclaimed Guy of Gisborne, who was too impatient to listen to any argument. “Have you not heard that folly, like love, lends wings to young feet? He climbed it, or leaped it perchance. By the bones of the Conqueror, do you not know that these Saxons have thews and muscles of steel, and that we shall have no peace until we snap them? Open the door, I say, unless you wish to give the sexton work, before daylight.”

“As you will, my lord,” Merkyn replied, flinging down the ponderous chain and turning the creaking lock. “To hear is to obey; but do not blame me if—”

The last word died away in a shriek, as Robin, rushing in, sent him staggering backwards with a blow from his fist.

Guy of Gisborne and his men, snatching up their weapons, started to their feet and stared in speechless amazement at the young Saxon who had to all appearance come alone.

“Guy of Gisborne!” Robin cried, pointing to him, “traitor to your royal master, tyrant to those who would be subjects to the king, I claim you as my prisoner for your share of this day’s work. For a deed of mine committed in lawful defense of my body, you took the life of a brave and innocent man and by the saints you shall suffer for it!”

Guy of Gisborne burst into a roar of laughter.

"A second David to slay another Goliath!" he cried. "Bring him hither, men, and make him welcome. I like him for this. He has come to give us rare sport, and were he not a Saxon I would take him into my own train. Ho, there! Wine for this young gamecock, who will soon crow his last."

Robin seized the goblet handed to him and flung the contents into Guy of Gisborne's face.

"That for my answer, and for your threats!" he exclaimed. "Ho, there, men of Sherwood! Ho, there, good foresters! Sweet liberty or death!"

In a moment the spacious ball was full of Robin's followers.

"At them!" shouted Little John. "Down with the tyrants! And ho for the tree that shall bear the weight of Guy of Gisborne!"

So sudden was the rush that for a space the Normans were thrown off their guard; but only for a moment.

All were heated with wine, and among them were tried men who bore scars of ugly wounds received in the heat of battle. They sprang to their arms, battle-axes and double-handled swords gleamed in the light of the flagging lamps, and the twang of cross-bows followed by the thud of the steel-tipped bolts told that although the Normans had been caught napping they were soon wide-awake.

But they had a still tougher and sterner stuff to deal with. The hardy foresters, giving themselves elbow room, discharged a flight of arrows right into the midst of the foe, bringing down several. Then, taking to their swords, they rushed forward.

Robin's aim was to meet Guy of Gisborne hand to hand, and leading the way he made a lane through the Normans; but they closed in and surrounded their lord and master, who white to the lips, saw death staring him in the face.

"Canst thou hew me a way to that man, friend Little John?" Robin cried to the giant.

"Ay, an' that can I!" roared the giant, brandishing his battle-axe. "Ho, there! A rope and a stout limb of a tree for Guy of Gisborne. Think of the homeless women and children! Remember the burning home-

steads! Revenge the death of Robin's father! On, on, men of Sherwood! Down with the tyrants!"

The Norman hirelings were already in a bad fix. Tables, chairs, benches were overturned. The clash of arms mingled with the moans of the wounded.

Next to Robin Hood and Little John was Friar Tuck, armed with a quarterstaff, and whenever it rose and fell with a curious twisting movement, down went a Norman.

Suddenly the head of a battle-axe flew off, and, striking an iron hoop on which the lamps were fixed, brought it down with a mighty crash and plunged the great hall in darkness.

Robin Hood cried out in an agony of vexation. He had come to seize Guy of Gisborne, and now that tyrant would escape him.

To fight in that pitchy darkness was impossible, and friends and foes lowered their weapons.

"Who has flint and steel?" Robin demanded. "If you love me, procure light. Guard well the door, for Guy of Gisborne must not escape."

Soon there came the click of flint on steel, and the foresters, again taking to their bows, prepared to send another volley of barbed arrows; but when at length a light was procured they discovered that most of the Normans, and Guy Gisborne in particular, had fled through a postern, or door, which had escaped notice.

And now through the forest rang the warning notes of a score of blaring horns. An alarm-bell, too, was sounding, and Robin knew that every Norman within ten miles would soon be hastening to the spot.

For signal followed signal. When danger was at hand, the man who heard the warning also sounded it, and it was passed on and on through an immense tract of land in a very short time.

Robin had lost one of his brave men, and had also three wounded to care for. To think of the dead just then was impossible, but the help-less must be given attention.

"Get you to the cave, and take the men with you," Little John said. "Friar Tuck and I will look to these poor fellows. Haste you, Robin, and do not stand there eating your heart out with vexation. Ill-fortune stood between you and Guy of Gisborne; but you will beat him yet. I tell you

that unless we be gone we shall have an army to fight against. If you think naught of your own life, remember the men who have sacrificed so much for you."

"Good, Little John," Robin replied. "You speak words of wisdom. It cuts me to the quick to skulk away though our enemies swarm like bees. Yet I must go. See you to the wounded. Where is the friar?"

Friar Tuck lay in the arms of two foresters, fanning his scarlet face and declaring that he was fit for nothing but to be buried forthwith. "Look you where one of the varlets struck my shaven crown, Robin. I am a dead man. Count your beads for me tonight."

"Up, and play the fat fool no longer," Little John chided him. "Hear you not the brazen breath of the men who thirst to see our heels dangling between heaven and earth? I'll warrant, monk, if they catch you, no priest will attend to give you consolation. Lend a hand with these poor fellows."

Friar Tuck's recovery was as marvelous as it was sudden. Throwing the foresters from him, he left off groaning and went straightway to Little John's assistance.

The giant took one wounded man on his back, and supported another on his left arm, while the friar, lifting the third as though he was a child, carried him to where Balaam was tethered.

Then the whole band seemed to melt into the darkness of the night while still the din of horns and ringing of bells went on. Robin and the main body of his foresters reached the cave in safety.

Maid Marian, rising from her couch of dried leaves and rushes, ran to meet her lover.

"Welcome! A thousand welcomes!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck. "Sweetheart, my slumber was disturbed with horrid dreams, and I awoke full of fear. But you have returned, and victorious."

"A victory, yes; but a poor one, and, scarcely worth boasting of," Robin replied. "We beat Guy of Gisborne in his own stronghold; but he lives, and he is free. I tell you, Marian, that I shall know no rest until I see that man lying dead at my feet."

"Think not of him now," Marian said tenderly. "My poor boy, you are weary, and there are lines on your face which I like not to see. Lie

down! I will make you a posset of hot wine, and bring you food. Then you must sleep."

"Not until the good friar and Little John have returned, bringing with them the hurt men who have shed their blood for me. Will Scarlet, how fares it with you?"

"As well as ever," Scarlet replied. "Think no more of my scratches and bruises, which a child might laugh at. Command me, Robin Hood. What shall I do?"

"Keep a sharp lookout for Friar Tuck and Little John, and tell me when they are coming."

Will Scarlet stayed no longer than to string his bow, and to see that his sword was hanging loosely in his belt. Leaving the cave he plunged into the forest, knowing full well the path which the friar and the giant would take. Soon he returned with Friar Tuck and two of the wounded men, but not with Little John.

Robin's heart sank. He saw by the expression of the friar's face that something disastrous had happened, and commanded him to speak.

"I have a sorry tale to tell," Friar Tuck said. "Little John is a prisoner. We were set upon by a rabble of varlets, who, paying no heed to the wounded men, seized Little John. Stars of heaven, how he fought! But they overpowered him at last."

"And you left him to his fate," Robin said bitterly.

"Hark you, Robin. Hood," Friar Tuck replied. "I may be a man of peace, yet I am no coward. Two miles from here lies my quarter-staff, broken into pieces no longer than your forearm. I had the wounded men to look to. I left one where he may be fetched. The others are here."

Robin Hood's face crimsoned with shame.

"Forgive me, good friar," he cried. "My feeling for my big friend did lead my tongue away. Alas, poor Little John! I shall never see his bluff face again, nor clasp his honest hand."

"Nay, but there is hope," Friar Tuck told him. "I heard the Normans say that they would take Little John to Oswald de Burgh, sheriff of Nottingham, that he might hang before the full gaze of the people."

"Say you so?" cried Robin. "Then there is hope indeed. Friar, your hand."

"Would that I had a hundred to give in your service," Friar Tuck replied, genially. "My only fear is that they will seek to weaken Little John with starvation, thirst, and torture. But let me not croak, as the raven did last night above my lonely cell. And now methinks I will refresh this poor body of mine. An you love me, Marian, give me food and drink, or I collapse like a pricked bladder. Even a man of peace requires feeding."

"And I will eat, too," Robin said. "Let the Normans chuckle and crow; we will have Little John with us again. Come, sit down, and let us talk. To Nottingham we must go."

"To Nottingham!" the men shouted. "We are with you, Robin Hood, be it for liberty or death." And before their shouts had died away Friar Tuck had started on the feast.

"This venison is most toothsome," he observed, carving a third slice with a dagger. "It is strange how sweet is the flesh of a stolen deer, for stolen the Normans would say it was. Oh, the ways of transgressors! Oh, this wicked world! Fie upon you all! Health to you, Robin; health, fair Maid Marian; health to you, freeborn foresters of Sherwood Forest."

Another cheer greeted his words, then all sat down to the meal, and while they ate they fell to discussing how Little John should be rescued from the power of Oswald de Burgh.

It was arranged that Robin Hood should set out alone disguised as a friar, and the rest follow on to Nottingham in twos and threes, for the purpose of warding off suspicion. What was to happen when they were in the town would depend upon circumstances, but they would know each other by certain signs.

It was almost dawn before a man of the band lay down to snatch a few hours' rest; but the foresters were hardened to fatigue, and had Robin Hood put their loyalty to the test they were ready to start then and there.

Will Scarlet volunteered to act as sentinel, and paced to and fro near the entrance of the cave.

Four times only did he turn the hourglass as the sand ran out, and then gave the signal that it was time for all to be up and doing.

CHAPTER 3

Little John Causes Trouble

LET US TURN briefly to Little John, and see how he fared at the hands of his oppressors. Attacked back and front, hewed and hacked at, the giant soon saw that he had no chance of victory against such odds as beset him, and shouted to Friar Tuck to make good his escape with the wounded men.

But it was not until the jolly monk had left a tell-tale mark on many a skull, and not until, as he said, his quarterstaff broke again and again, that he obeyed Little John's commands. The Normans were so delighted with their capture that they scarcely heeded Friar Tuck, but allowed him to creep away in the darkness and return to the wounded men, who had wisely crawled into the undergrowth while the fight was on.

Meanwhile, the news of what had happened at Guy de Gisborne's stronghold had already reached Oswald de Burgh, the sheriff of Nottingham.

Gisborne, the fugitive, hot and breathless, arrived himself with the tidings at Nottingham Castle, and De Burgh's fury knew no bounds.

"What, do they dare to dispute my authority?" he exclaimed, with a face as dark as a thundercloud. "I tell you, Gisborne, that these churls shall remember it bitterly. Fitzooth I hated. He was in my way, and you did well to hang him. But listen, we must invent a story for the king, and one that will excuse the deed well, for Richard has a tenderness for these rebels."

"Were Richard a forester, he would be a rebel himself," Guy of Gisborne replied, leaning forward and speaking in a whisper. "'Tis not treason to say that, I hope."

"Nay, for I know Richard's nature too well. Hot-headed and reckless, he has done that which, were he not king, would win him the prize of the strongest hempen rope in Christendom. Hark! What is that? The bell clangs, and the men on the outer walls are astir. Listen! They are lowering the drawbridge and raising the portcullis! Who can it be that comes so late tonight?"

At that moment the thick tapestried curtains parted, and a henchman appeared.

"My lord," he said, "certain numbers of men are here, bringing with them the big forester there is so much talk of—one called Little John."

"Say you so?" De Burgh cried gleefully. "If your words are true, a chain of gold shall bedeck your neck. But make sure, for I am in no mood to bear disappointments."

"Even now," replied the henchman, "they are bringing in the prisoner."

"And let them bring him in here that I may feast my eyes on him," said the sheriff.

"And mine, too," cried Guy of Gisborne savagely.

With clanging arms the captors dragged their huge captive into the presence of Oswald de Burgh and the wolfish Gisborne. Little John, standing erect and folding his arms, glared defiance first at one and then at the other.

"'Tis he, right enough," Burgh said. "Are you sure that the beast is safely bound? Let him be loaded with chains.

Again the Normans threw themselves upon the giant, who, affecting a sudden weakness, offered no resistance to them.

"Now, thief of a forester," said De Burgh, snarling at him, "tell me what fate you expect?"

"No mercy from such a mongrel-bred cur as you," Little John retorted. "As for Guy of Gisborne, who stands there like a lout grinning through a horse-collar at a fair, he is beneath my contempt. He slunk away from us Saxons, churls though he calls us. Mark how the ape curls his lips now that he knows that these hands of mine are safe from grip-ping him."

"It would be almost as well to deprive him of his tongue to begin with," Guy of Gisborne said. "My lord shakes his head. What! Will you permit him to insult you with impunity?"

"Patience, good Gisborne," De Burgh replied. "Yonder mass of rebellion shall smart for it, fear not. He will find a different use for his tongue. Now, Little John, hear me. Much as I desire to take your life, yet will I spare it, if you will lead my men to where young Robin hides."

"Let me but warn him of your coming, and I will lead you to him readily enough," Little John rejoined.

"They tell me that you foresters, defying the laws, and threatening the king, have secret places," De Burgh next said.

"True enough; but hear me," the giant replied. "We defy no good law, but help to keep it. We fight against tyranny, and for those God commands us to love and protect. Our homes have been pulled down about our ears, our wives and daughters insulted, our little children beaten, and our dogs maimed. Such things we fight against, and will so go on fighting. But, proud sheriff, when you tell me that we threaten the king, I tell you to your teeth, you lie! Would that Richard were here. He should judge between a true man and a traitor."

"Have him dispatched!" Guy of Gisborne urged hoarsely, in a fever of apprehension. "There is no knowing when Richard may pay another visit to your castle."

"Fool, keep your tongue quiet!" De Burgh hissed, losing his temper. "My aim is to make this man tell me what I want to know. Little John, I will give you another chance. Where do Robin and his followers hide?"

"Where the badger burrows, where the hawk builds, where the kestrel swings his nest," Little John replied. "Take that for an answer, I will say no more."

"Beneath this castle is a dungeon filled with loathsome toads and biting reptiles," De Burgh said. "Take heed that you do not find your way there presently."

Back came the undaunted reply: "There is no more loathsome toad, or crawling reptile than yourself, Norman boaster! I despise your offer, and laugh at your threats. If I am to die—a hundred, nay, five hundred men, will spring to arms to avenge me. You smile with your lips, but in your heart you tremble."

"By Pluto, you shall suffer for this," De Burgh raged.

"I doubt it not," Little John retorted. "But listen! As sheriff of Nottingham you must show just cause and reason for every execution. Richard the lion-hearted king has commanded it. He suspects you, for certain things have come to his ears which he likes not."

"Tomorrow at noon you shall hang before the eyes of the people!" De Burgh replied. "Ho, there! Send for the warders, and have this dog of a Saxon hurled into a dungeon. Moreover, watch him well; for if he escapes a dozen headless shoulders shall answer for it!"

"Poor fools, you hear that!" said Little John, turning to the Norman retainers. "This is your promised reward for fighting for such a counterfeit and mountebank in authority as this. Bah! Lead on, I'll follow. Locks, bolts, and bars may hold me, chains gall my flesh; but you can neither break my spirit nor frighten me into turning traitor. I speak truths, not like you on whose word no man depends."

"Silence!" whispered one, of the warders, clutching his arm. "Can you not see that you are hastening your own doom? My lord, what shall we give the prisoner to eat and drink?"

"Neither bite nor sip," De Burgh replied.

"That will be no punishment," Little John said, laughing as he thought how chapfallen Friar Tuck would look were such a sentence passed on him. "Many a day and night have I gone without food and drink while lying in the forest listening for the bay of your bloodhounds."

So saying, the giant swung himself round on his heels and clanked down the stone staircase, hemmed in by warders and pikemen.

"By my faith!" Little John said, "I was never so well taken care of, nor did ever believe that I deserved so much attention."

Down and still down they went until a damp, earthy smell told that they were far under the castle.

"Methinks I scent the slimy moat, where they say lies many a dread secret, and the glutted fish grow blind with age," Little John said, as one of the warders stopped and began unlocking a ponderous door. "Fain, would I have a more cheerful apartment; but I doubt not that I shall sleep well."

"You will sleep deeply soon," replied one of the men. "Haunt us not, giant; there are ghosts enough in the castle."

"Fear not," Little John assured him. "Only the specters of men who have done evil, and are doomed to return to the scenes of their deeds, trouble the living. Pah! Why, the water comes through the very roof."

"And on the floor and walls you will find very good company," cried a warder, giving him a violent push. The unnecessary act of cruelty sealed the man's doom.

Bellowing like a bull, Little John turned, and swinging his manacled arms upwards brought down his huge fists, chains and all, upon the man, killing him instantly.

"Now strike if you will, slaves!" he said to the pikemen. "Captive I may be, but still am I dangerous at close quarters."

For a moment they held back, and then, fearing the anger of De Burgh, they forced Little John step by step into the dungeon and pinned him against the wall, while the warders attached a girdle of iron to his waist, and riveted a ponderous chain to it.

"Escape now if you can," said one of the men. "Mark me, giant, this deed of yours will only add to your sufferings. The sheriff shall hear of it forthwith."

"Would that he lay yonder instead of that poor meddling fool," Little John responded.

"Away and leave me. Tell the master you bend knee and neck to that I have deprived him of one slave; but I doubt not that hundreds of such wretches hunger to do his bidding." The great noisy door swung upon him, and Little John was left in pitchy darkness.

Beneath his feet, and on the walls around him, he could hear horrid creeping things. Sweltering toads waddled close to him, and red-eyed rats, famished and bold, scuttled past, squeaking savagely and scarcely frightened at the clanking of his chains.

Once a number of these brutes attacked Little John; but he stamped the lives out of all that came within his reach, and the others fled, waiting and watching, that he might fall asleep.

But Little John knew his danger, and determined to keep awake. His brain was busy, and the time flew quickly. That Friar Tuck would not desert him in his hour of need, and that Robin and his men would use every effort to same him, Little John did not doubt. But would they come in time?

Oswald de Burgh had told him that he should hang at noon on the morrow. It was past midnight when the sheriff spoke Would he carry out his threat literally, or bring him out for execution at noon that day?

As a matter of fact, although Little John did not know it, Oswald de Burgh meant exactly what he said. If, so he argued with himself, he kept Little John a prisoner without food or drink for a number of hours, the giant would repent of his boldness and tell how and where the foresters lived when made fugitives by the Normans. For this reason the sheriff of Nottingham made light of the killing of the warder.

"He should not have been so busy with his hands," he said. "It will be a lesson to you to act in concert when dealing with the giant. But be comforted. He shall have a giblet strong enough to hold him. Now to my couch, for day is dawning. Guy of Gisborne, I bid you depart. Fear not; the Saxon outlaw will leave you in peace, and all Sherwood Forest, I wot, for some long time to come."

Guy of Gisborne was very reluctant to leave the castle and the protection it afforded him, but he could not gainsay the sheriff, his master. Soon after his departure the larks rose to greet the rising sun, and the splendour of heaven shone upon the earth.

IN THOSE DAYS people of all stations of life, were they bent on toil or pleasure, rose early, and the day had not been counted by five hours when there rode into the forest of Sherwood a goodly company of splendidly equipped Normans with their pages and esquires.

No ordinary party of men was this, for Richard, the Lion-Hearted king, was in their midst, and a goodly picture he made, too. Over a complete suit of chain mail, the rings of which shone like polished silver, he wore a short tunic of purple silk, on which was emblazoned the arms of England and the fleur-de-lis of France. A light helmet, encircled with a crown of gold, adorned his head, and his handsome face was revealed through the open visor.

At his side rode Blondel, the court minstrel, clad in black velvet trimmed with fur and gold, his head bare, and a small harp in his hand, upon which he occasionally struck tuneful chords.

"Sing, Blondel, sing," Richard said. "It is a morning for song, as the throat of every bird is now telling."

Without checking the pace of his ambling horse, Blondel's fine tenor voice rang out so sublimely that the trees seemed to stop swaying in the breeze to listen:

Lord of the axe, though widely spread
Thy deeds in arms, and prowess known,
A brighter glory round thy head.
Now radiant beams—and all thine own,
A crown of light thou fain must prize.
When lit at Berengaria's eyes.

"By all the wonders of the world, that sounds sweetly," Richard cried. "Yet it is not of my mood."

"How likes my liege this?" Blondel asked, breaking into another ballad.

The streams of Garenne are bright and fair,
And sweet the hum of the wild bee there;
And 'tis good to lie 'neath the green tree tall
And list to the rush of the waterfall.
But dearer and sweeter to me is far,
The rush of war!—war!—glorious war!

"That" said Richard, "is more to my taste. Sing on! But stay! Who comes here? A holy friar, airing himself through the eyelets of his cowl before the Angelus calls him to prayer."

It was Robin Hood disguised as a friar who attracted Richard's attention.

"How now?" cried out the king, in his jovial voice. "Why so sad and downcast? Why walk you with measured tread, when the very green earth cries out for all living things to be merry?"

"He who looks higher than the earth has more cause to rejoice," Robin replied, halting, and leaning heavily on his staff. "I love the sun

that shines, the flowers that bloom, and the birds that sing. But I am not satisfied here where princes in their brief spell of authority oppress."

"By the mass, you have a bold tongue, friar. You give me the taunt direct," Richard said, frowning.

"The Holy Church puts no bridle on the tongues of her fathers," Robin responded. "She bids them speak the truth. Look to it, Richard, earthly lord of all that surrounds you, and see that the people have not better reason to curse than bless you."

"By my diadem, I am all amazement!" the king cried.

"Let us proceed," Blondel whispered. "Faint with fasting and keeping long vigils, this old man croaks."

"Nay, but I would question him further," the king said, soothing his impatient steed. "Give the friar gold."

"I ask not for gold, but for justice," Robin Hood replied. "Look around you. Here in this forest dwelt a happy and peaceful people. Long before the days of Edward the Confessor they asked, and ask no more now, that they might continue their humble pursuits unmolested. But what has happened? The men you and your ancestors appointed have sorely oppressed these poor people, driving them forth to starve, hanging them for even speaking of their wrongs. Even this is known by babes, who curse the Norman line with their lisping lips."

"All this is news to me," the king said. "Brother John, to you I left the appointments of Sherwood, Nottingham; and Derby. What manner of men are those you have invested with power?"

"Good nobles and true," replied Prince John, riding to the king's side. "Turn a deaf ear to the friar. For aught we know he may be a rebel forester in disguise, and carry deadly weapons of some kind beneath his minion's garb."

"Nevertheless, I will inquire into it," said Richard, by no means satisfied with Prince John's explanation. "I would have my people, be they Normans or Saxons, free, happy, and contented."

"There is now a man lying in the dungeons of Nottingham Castle I would have your majesty question before he is done to death by Oswald de Burgh," Robin Hood said.

"Listen friar," responded the king, wrinkling his brow into a frown. "Perchance we may lodge at Nottingham Castle, and there make such inquiries as suit us best. But were we to pay heed to every idle story that comes to our ears we had heed to surrender our sceptre to the first discontent we met. Your speech has not fallen on deaf ears. Be satisfied with that assurance, and continue your prayers. Your mission is to save souls and not interfere in matters of the world that concern you not."

"Take heed, Richard, that you do not delay your inquiry too long," Robin Hood rejoined. "The dog will lick the hand that has struck him, and men are patient, but there is a limit to patience and human endurance."

So saying, Robin Hood took a book from his wallet, and bending his head over it walked away.

"My royal brother," said Prince John, "yonder goes more of the rogue than the friar.

"If that be so," replied the king, laughing, "he is a clever rogue, and I forgive him."

ROBIN HOOD TOOK a path by which horses could not travel; but no sooner was the royal party out of sight and hearing than he returned to the broad, beaten track, and, putting aside his pretended infirmities, walked swiftly on towards a thatched cottage, where he knew he had but to declare his identity to be sure of the loan of a horse.

The cottage was inhabited by an aged forester. Nearly a hundred years old, he had many a tale to tell, heard from his parents, of the coming of the Normans, of William the Conqueror, and his fierce successor Rufus. But he was too old to do anything now but to sit at his cottage door when the sun shone, or crouch over a fire of faggots when the wintry wind tore madly through the forest, and babble of the days now gene.

A few words from Robin brought warm blood into the old man's face and made his eyes sparkle as though the light of youth had returned to hem.

"My son has gone afield," the old fellow said, "and will be sorry that he did not see you. There are three horses in the stalls, and you are

welcome to take your choice. The dapple grey is the quieter, and per-haps more fit for a friar."

"I care not so that he can take me to Nottingham, and quickly, too," Robin replied.

He had trained himself to ride astride or side-saddle, and now chose the latter style, as it was mostly affected by the fathers of the Church when travelling long distances.

Waving a parting salute to the old man, he set out, and the dapple grey, answering gallantly to his call, moved over the ground at a spanking pace.

MEANWHILE, GUY OF GISBORNE, having, as we know, returned earlier from Nottingham Castle, had heard tidings of the approach of Richard and his train. As soon as the news reached him he left his stronghold and rode away alone, hoping to intercept the king and pay him homage.

For Guy of Gisborne had his eye on Nottingham Castle and the fair lands about it, and he saw no reason why, if anything should happen to Oswald de Burgh, the sheriffship and estates, both being in the gift of the king, should not fall into his greedy hands.

Here was another chance of gaining the royal favour, and wearing his best smile on his fawning face, Guy of Gisborne dashed through the forest.

Presently he saw the "friar" on horseback in his path.

"Out of my way," he shouted, "or I will ride over you, and leave the crows to pick holes through your cowl."

"Not so fast," Robin replied. "Norman noble, so I take your distinction to be, I would have a word with you. Nay, I will brook no refusal, but will 'en ride at your side and have my say out."

The Norman treated him to a haughty stare.

"What manner of a monk are you that address me in such terms?" he demanded.

"One who knows where young Robin hides; one who holds the inmost secrets of his heart. You understand?"

Guy of Gisborne's eyes began to glisten.

"I cannot tarry now," he said, after a thoughtful pause. "The king travels this way, and I must meet him. Moreover, I have business at Nottingham Castle today, and in the marketplace of Nottingham tomorrow at noon, when a rebel hangs."

"Tomorrow at noon," Robin Hood repeated, inclining his head. " "'Tis well. I have heard that a capture was made of one called Little John."

"A bulky villain; a dangerous rogue," Guy of Gisborne cried, flushing hotly. "But enough. Meet me when you will at Nottingham tomorrow after eight."

"That I cannot do," Robin replied. "I am otherwise employed. List! I will meet you at the ruined priory tonight, one hour after the Curfew Bell has sounded."

Guy of Gisborne started, and the light of suspicion shone from his eyes.

"Alone?" he said.

"Alone—yes."

"What is your object? What reward do you ask?"

"Your influence at court."

"Your name?"

"That you shall know tonight."

"Monk," Guy of Gisborne said, "you may be more enemy than friend."

"You have the power to destroy me," Robin Hood replied, laughing deep down in his throat. "But remember, with my death dies my secret."

"Divulge it, then. Come closer."

Robin Hood was in the act of seizing Guy of Gisborne, and hurling him from his horse, when a horn sounded, and some of the Norman's retainers appeared.

"I will not speak now," Robin said. "Tonight at the ruined priory, or never."

"I will be there," Guy of Gisborne replied.

CHAPTER 4

Guy of Gisborne
Pays the Penalty

WHILE THIS WAS GOING on, Little John was consoling himself as best he could in his cell. At times he sang to keep himself awake, and for company's sake; yet he was not sorry when the door was flung open and the light of a lantern shone upon armed men.

"My hour has come," Little John thought, as he braced himself up for the ordeal.

He soon discovered his mistake. Oswald de Burgh, desirous of interrogating him, had ordered his removal to the council-chamber of the castle, and thither Little John was taken.

De Burgh was seated at a table, with wine and rare dainties of food spread out before him, and as the prisoner entered the Sheriff poured out a goblet of sparkling wine and toyed with it in his hand.

For the life of him, Little John could not help smacking his lips, for his thirst was almost beyond endurance. De Burgh noticed this, and, drinking the wine, refilled the goblet.

"Forester," he said, "I have brought you from darkness into light to ask you to reconsider your answer. You have slain a worthy warder of mine, an act that merits death; but even that I am willing to look over and spare your life if you will be wise and loosen your tongue and tell me where the outlaws hide.

"What!" exclaimed Little John, "did I not loosen it enough to your liking when I was first brought before you? What would you have me call you, Norman? I'faith, I exhausted my stock of ugly names, and am not in the mood to invent more."

"Fool!" cried De Burgh, passionately. "Put you no value on your life?"

"My life is not my own," Little John responded bravely. "First, it belongs to God, who gave it; secondly, my country has a claim upon it; and thirdly, I would lay it down in the dust a thousand times sooner than

give you occasion to rejoice at and triumph by any word that fell from my lips."

"You are hungry?" asked De Burgh.

"Ay, so hungry that, were there an ox within sound of my voice, the beast would take fright and flee."

"Then be my guest, and henceforth be my friend and chief henchman," De Burgh said. "Who are these men—your friends, you call them? Would they do so much for you, suffer so much, refuse so much, as you in your obstinate mood are doing?"

"I know not," Little John replied. "I am the keeper of no other conscience than my own, yet I swear to you that I believe there is not one man among them, the men you would have me betray, that would not court death with a laugh rather than ensnare one of his fellows."

Stung to fury by his failure to break his captive's spirit, the sheriff flung a goblet of wine into Little John's face.

"Mass of pig's flesh, I'll have you torn limb from limb!" De Burgh roared. "Away with him, and await my commands."

At that moment a loud fanfare of trumpets penetrated through the loopholes of the massive walls, and a retainer, hot and breathless, appeared.

"What now?" De Burgh demanded. "Has the capture of Robin, that arch-rebel, been effected?"

"No, my lord," the retainer replied. "King Richard is at the gates with Prince John."

"Say you so?" De Burgh replied. "Then I must hasten to meet them. Away with yon blaring bull. 'Twill be death for any man to mention his name until the king is gone."

"Brute, coward, and villain!" Little John cried, tearing at his fetters. "I will see the king. He shall know what sort of wretch is placed in authority here! I will not move! Ho! there, Richard of England! Ho! ho!"

"Gag him! Stab him!" De Burgh shrieked. "Get him hence. Anyhow—anywhere!"

The giant's rage was terrible to behold. Hurling the Normans from him as though they were straws, he dashed his chains against the wall, scattering the links, and it was not until he had received several tremen-

dous blows from the blunt end of a pike that he fell, gasping, throbbing, and all but dead.

"Quick! away with him!" de Burgh thundered.

Too late. Richard, brooking no delay, was already in the castle, and, attended by Prince John and his suite, was ascending the stairs.

Oswald de Burgh, scarcely knowing what he was doing, ran to the door, and dropping on one knee, bowed his head in homage to the Lion-Hearted king.

"Why, what is this?" Richard demanded, gazing in astonishment at the prostrate and unconscious form of Little John. "'Tis hardly the reception expected! Who is this man? What mean those broken chains and streaks of blood on the floor?"

"My liege," De Burgh stammered, "this varlet is a notorious deer-stealer, a despoiler of law-abiding people's homes, and a murderer. He has already taken one life in this castle."

"This," whispered Prince John, in the king's ear, "must be one of the foresters the friar talked so glibly of. I tell you, brother, that kindness is thrown way on them."

"E'en so, your majesty," De Burgh said, plucking up courage to speak boldly. "I have tried every means to pacify these Saxons, but my efforts have been met with lies and tales of tyranny such as never entered into my mind."

"Humph!" Richard muttered. "All this sounds passing strange to my ears."

"Only yesterday," De Burgh continued, "Robin Fitzooth slew a messenger sent to his father with a copy of the laws of the forest, signed by your own royal hand, and the varlet is now hiding with other rebels amid the caves and vastnesses of Sherwood Forest."

"I must see these laws and study them closely," Richard said, with his splendid eyes still fixed on Little John. "Scarce two days had I been crowned, when my princely brother set the great seal on the parchment and brought it to me to sign. Oswald de Burgh, see that you use this man well. Attend us now to some other apartment. We will remain until eventide."

Oswald de Burgh was delighted; but presently there came into his black heart a sensation of uneasiness.

Guy of Gisborne, he learnt from one of the king's knights, had met Richard in the forest. What had he whispered into the royal ears? De Burgh would have given the gold chain about his neck and the jewelled ring upon his finger to know what the chief ranger had said.

However, there was one consolation for de Burgh. He had the king's brother, Prince John, entirely on his side, and, moreover, there would be no more questions asked about Little John. And the giant should hang in the presence of the multitude, and his dead body be gibbeted until it turned black and foul.

BUT GUY OF GISBORNE was mentally working out a plan of campaign to get the better of his master, although his mind misgave him.

The friar he had met that morning demanded Gisborne's influence at court as the price of his secret. There seemed nothing suspicious in that, when it came to be thought out.

Friars were human, and just then there were abbeys with fat lands in the gift of the king and his favourites, and Guy of Gisborne flattered himself that he had made himself agreeable to the warlike monarch, and particularly so to the sinister Prince John.

The day wore on, and at last night fell upon the good town of Nottingham. By the time darkness had set in there were few people to be seen in the quaint streets. Now and then an inn door swung open, and a customer entered or departed; but otherwise the place seemed deserted.

But from the market-place there came the noise of hammers ringing on iron bolts, and the thud of mallets upon beams of wood.

A number of men were erecting the gibbet on which Little John was to die on the morrow at noon.

Finding the time that must pass before he kept his appointment lagging heavy on his hands, Guy of Gisborne entered a hostelry and called for wine.

A number of men had been talking, but ceased abruptly as he entered. They looked honest enough, and appeared to be tradesmen and yeomen of the neighbourhood.

"Friends," said Guy of Gisborne, flinging money on the table, 'tis cold for the time of year, and reminds one more of Martinmas than the month of May. You have heard that the king was at the castle today. Drink to his health and long life. Mine host, look you to me for payment."

Little did Guy of Gisborne dream that those very men were foresters of Sherwood, and were panting for the opportunity to rush to the rescue of their burly and beloved friend, Little John.

Of Robin Hood, not one of his followers had seen any sign or heard any word. That Friar Tuck was at Nottingham they knew; but he would converse with none, and merely waddled about counting his beads and murmuring to himself, as was the custom of his brotherhood when abroad.

Guy of Gisborne drank freely, for as the hour of his appointment with the mysterious monk, whom we know to have been Robin Hood, drew near he began to blame himself for not having at least a few men within call.

But he laughed his fears to scorn, and at length wended his way to the ruined priory.

It was, as Guy of Gisborne had said, a chilly night. A driving mist obscured the moon, and the wind, which had risen suddenly, had a hollow sound in it which struck none too cheerfully in the ears of the Norman.

Through the churchyard stepped Guy of Gisborne, sword in hand.

The friar had not arrived; or, at least, he was not in sight. The Norman began to grow suspicious. Stay! It wanted a few minutes to nine, perchance. But, no; Guy of Gisborne had distinctly heard a watch-man proclaiming the hour, and noted how he had peered into the houses to see that the law of "couvre feu"—or, in other words, that no fires had been left burning—had been obeyed.

A weight came into his heart. The long, keen sword trembled in his hand as he stole towards a stone column, resolved to wait there.

Then the very darkness from the roof seemed to descend upon him. Out of the black obscurity there came something that clutched at his throat.

With a gasp he reeled, uttered a low cry like a trapped hare, and, in his bewilderment and dismay, dropped his sword.

Then he heard the only other weapon he possessed fly echoing along the pavement. It was evident that the man attacking him had resolved to do so single-handed.

And so they fought in terrible, silent fury. Guy of Gisborne soon discovered that he had not a friar to contend with. His antagonist was young, lithe, active, and strong. The Norman knew that his life depended on his tact and strength.

The struggle went on. The writhing bodies intertwisted, each man grasping the other's throat.

With a despairing effort Guy of Gisborne at last tried to break away from his assailant. He gave a sudden twist; but all in vain.

A blow as from a fist of iron descended upon his face. The night swam before him, and then the air seemed to be full of great splashes of fire and all consciousness went from him, and he knew no more . . .

When, some time later, Guy of Gisborne stirred with the pain of chilled blood coursing slowly through his cramped limbs, he had no notion of what had happened.

He was in a small room containing nothing more than the bed he lay upon and a massive high-backed chair. The chamber was dimly lighted by two small loopholes near the ceiling, through which came a sound like the rustling of foliage.

For some time he lay, vaguely listening, and endeavouring to collect his thoughts. Then, when the happenings of the past came back to him, he realised how numb and deathly weak he was.

Who was the man that assailed him? Who could he be, and where was he now? Was Guy of Gisborne a prisoner, or had he been found and carried to a friendly shelter?

These, and a score of other questions, tumbled over in his whirling brain; but he was not kept long in suspense.

Suddenly the door opened, and Guy of Gisborne uttered a cry of equally compounded astonishment, rage, and dismay. Robin Hood, clad in his forest costume, bow in hand and looking well and handsome, stood before him.

"There is no postern to slip through here," Robin Hood said quietly. "I am sorry that we did not meet on the occasion you thought it convenient to ride in haste to Nottingham Castle; but I must be content, Guy of Gisborne, you were in my power last night. I might have killed you; but only traitors harm defenceless men."

"I see," Guy of Gisborne returned. "You were the friar in disguise. We fought and I am your prisoner. Well, I am defenceless now."

"Not so. In a short time, after you have had food and drink, you will be yourself again," Robin Hood said. "But time flies, and Little John is a captive, condemned to death."

Guy of Gisborne thought he saw his chance, and seized it.

"You have brought me to this place for the purpose of revenge," he said." Your friend Little John is in danger. Let me go free, and I will do my best to save him." Robin Hood threw back his head and laughed bitterly.

"Gramercy, Guy of Gisborne!" he cried; "'but methinks I have a way of helping Little John without your aid. As for you, you shall go free presently; but how long your freedom will last is a question which will receive a sharp answer.

"I do not understand you," Guy of Gisborne said.

"Listen, then, Norman," Robin Hood said sternly. "You stood by when my father died the death of a felon. You gave the order that put the cruel rope round his neck and robbed him of his noble life; and I, the son of the murdered man, swore to know neither peace nor rest until I had demanded an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

"It was I who met you in the forest, I who wrested and overthrew you in the ruined priory," Robin continued, "I who brought you here, and I who will, in spite of all, presently give you a chance of saving your base life."

"Noble forester, I will remember this kindly act."

"Perchance; but I have my doubts of that," Robin rejoined, smiling grimly. "Rise. There is good food and wine in that basket near the wall."

With catching breath, wan face, and bloodshot eyes, Guy of Gisborne dragged his limbs to the basket, and, placing it near the chair, sat down to eat. If there were an ordeal to pass through, he might as well be prepared for it, and it was not until he had almost emptied the basket and put it aside that he spoke again.

"This is not a prison, although I am a prisoner," he said.

"No, you are in the house of a friend of mine," Robin replied. "We are the only occupants of it, and so shall be until I have accomplished my end. Listen, Guy of Gisborne."

Walking across the room, Robin Hood threw open the door and pointed to another chamber, through the open window of which a meadow could be seen.

"Fifty paces start I will give you," Robin said, "before I shoot with my bow. Then will come the time for you to use your legs; but I trow that my shaft will carry much quicker. Still, you ought to be grateful to me. Had I fallen into your hands, you would have carried out your threat of flaying me alive. Hasten, then, and make the most use of the chance I give."

Guy of Gisborne bit his under lip, and his craven heart grey sick. He remembered that, through all the country and miles beyond it, Robin and his father had long been feared for their marvellous skill with the bow; and now he, Guy of Gisborne, was to put it to the test, supplying the target with his own body.

"Come!" Robin cried. "Haste you, or my itching fingers may loosen the string even here. Away—away!"

Guy of Gisborne dashed for the meadow, and fled, doubling across it like a hunted hare. Fifty paces, full and fair, did Robin count, and then the arrow went hissing from the bow.

It cut its way through ringlets of steel and shirt of mail, cleft its way clean through the Norman's heart; and Guy of Gisborne, turning completely round in his agony, fell with his face towards Robin Hood, who thus avenged his father's murder.

CHAPTER 5

A Surprise
for the Sheriff

ONCE HE WAS BACK in his cell, whither he had been carried upon arrival of King Richard, the giant Little John soon recovered, and De Burgh, thinking that he had tortured him sufficiently, sent him food and wine.

Little John made light of what had happened. He did not see the king; but the king had seen him without a doubt, and Richard was not the man to allow such a scene to pass easily from his memory.

So the giant ate heartily, even taking a meal within an hour of being summoned to pay the penalty of his supposed crimes.

In the market-place of Nottingham was assembled a vast crowd, and a band of troops was necessary to keep back the multitude from pressing too near the great, black, ugly engine of death, the gibbet.

"I tell you," said a plainly-dressed man, bearing the appearance of a substantial citizen, "that they will never dare to hang Little John."

"And why not?" demanded the fellow next to him.

"Because the foresters of Sherwood are in good favour with the people at large," was the reply. "There is another reason. It is said that there are friends who will yet save him."

"Then they must deal with strange spirits," said the other. "Little John has done too much mischief to escape the vengeance of the sheriff. Yes, Little John will hang, and if what is said of him at the castle be true, the world will soon be rid of a nuisance."

"You speak well and truly, Master Walter," put in a third party.

The last speaker was a man of enormous size, with a head even larger in proportion to his unwieldy body.

"What!" cried Master Walter, "my excellent friend and gossip, Master Wolfshead! What brings you hither?"

"Truly, I came to see the sight," the burly one replied. "Why should I not take my morning's amusement as well as my neighbours? Besides" he added, "I am anxious to see how Little John will bear himself."

"He trounced you well not so long ago, Wolfshead," cried a voice from the crowd. "Get you home, and have a care that Little John is not there before you."

"What churlish knave said that?" Wolfshead demanded, glaring round in a fury.

"Hold your tongue, and let the matter pass," Master Walter whispered. "I do not wonder at your hatred of Little John. Everyone here knows how heavily he lighted on you last Michaelmas fair. You will only make it worse by trying to deny it."

"A pestilence on him!" Wolfshead howled through his beard. "I have never properly recovered from it; but the laugh will be on my side now. There will be no upsetting the executioner and running away. Our good sheriff has taken proper precautions to prevent such a catastrophe."

At this moment there was an ominous movement in the crowd. First there came a number of men-at-arms, then a cart containing Little John, the executioner, and several men in complete armour.

The cart was well protected on each side, and a score of mounted men, armed with lances and with unsheathed swords dangling from their belts, brought up the rear.

A loud shout hailed the appearance of Little John. It was a shout full of sympathy and encouragement, completely drowning the groans and hisses raised by a few.

Then it was found that neither Oswald de Burgh nor his chaplain was present.

"Where is the sheriff?" roared someone.

"A priest! A priest!" cried another. "Do not let the poor fellow die un-shriven! Shame! Shame!"

"Ay, shame upon these Norman tyrants" yelled a third. "A priest! A priest! Is there a holy father present?"

There was, and a very large one to boot.

Without uttering a word, he allowed himself to be pushed forward by the crowd. The soldiers, scarcely knowing what to do, let him through,

and in a few moments he was listening to Little John's confession—at least, so many believed.

"My son," whispered Friar Tuck, for he it was, "stoop lower. List! Straight ahead up yonder hill stands a lonely house. Tethered to the gate you will find a horse, which, if not up to your weight, is able to carry you few miles. Ride straight for the woods, which you will see in front. You follow me?"

"Yes, holy father—yes."

"Hide until night, and answer no signal but the twitter of a robin. And now" added the cowled friar aloud, "farewell, my son."

Friar Tuck moved hastily away, and was soon lost in the crowd.

"Now, Little John," cried the masked executioner, taking the rope in his hand, "the time has come for you to take your reward."

The last word had scarcely passed his lips when the executioner, uttering a shriek, flung his arms wildly upwards, and then fell grovelling in the dust. Very few knew what had happened to the man until two soldiers, raising him, showed an arrow sticking through his throat.

There was not even time to conjecture where the arrow had come from, for scarcely had the executioner breathed his last when a flight of arrows crashed into the men-at-arms.

The next moment, a rush was made towards the gibbet by a number of men who had hitherto kept in the back ground. Armed with hunting-knives and short axes, they attacked the guard so fiercely and suddenly as to bear down all before them, and a wide space was soon cleared for Little John.

"Lose not a moment!" cried a man. "A lane is already made for you. Haste, and forget not what the good friar said. See, here is a horse. Ride it to the top of the hill, and then discard it for the stronger steed you will find there."

All these startling happenings had occupied but a few minutes.

"Ride for your life!"

Little John recognised Robin Hood's voice as the crowd seemed to roll away from him like parting clouds, while the guards were being beaten off in an opposite direction.

The horse provided for Little John gave out before it reached the house at the top of the hill; but the animal had served its purpose.

Little John looked back. There were no pursuers in sight, but he knew they would came fast enough; so, giving himself barely time to fill his lungs with air, he mounted the fresh and stronger horse and rode away to the woods.

On reaching the border, the giant dismounted, and turning the horse's head set it free, knowing that the noble brute would make its way back again without much delay.

In the wood all was as still as though nothing had happened.

BUT DOWN IN THE vale consternation reigned among the Normans. Three of their number had been killed outright by the arrows, and over twenty wounded. Great execution, too, had been done in the after-attack, and the beaten men, instead of rallying and fighting to the bitter end, had retreated with all haste to Nottingham Castle.

Oswald de Burgh was congratulating himself that he had got an enemy out of his path, when the news of Little John's escape was brought to him.

He was stunned, and stared about him like a man in a dream. The courtyard of the castle was crowded with defeated men, each blaming the other. Over the drawbridge, they were bringing the wounded and dead warriors who had never been known to blanch until death overtook them. Surely it could not be true that these despised foresters had dared to attack a trained band of disciplined soldiers! So argued Oswald de Burgh, but he realised it all too soon.

Then his fury got the master of him. Roaring like a lion, and foaming at the mouth, he strode up and down, striking at all who came within his reach.

"Ho, there!" he cried.

"Send for Guy of Gisborne. Why was he not here to take command today? Bring him to me! I smell treachery. Pshaw! I dream, I rave. Ho, scrivener, write you to Guy of Gisborne and tell him to make a rare bonfire of these foresters hovels tonight! Not one shall remain! I swear it! Or, if

it be not done, I shall be made the laughing-stock of every grinning Saxon knave."

So raved the sheriff of Nottingham and while he raved Little John was losing no time in seeking for a safe hiding-place.

The wood he had entered was a naturally planted one, and the trees grew in profusion, without regard to size or style. The giant found an oak-tree, and, climbing into it, discovered to his great joy that just above the lower limbs, the trunk was hollow.

He had no weapon such as he loved to wield; but anything heavy in his huge hands was formidable, and, breaking off a short branch, he trimmed off the leaves and converted it into a ragged and knotted club.

"Now, by Thor and Mars!" quoth the giant, peering through his leafy perch, "I am good enough for a dozen steel-tapped Normans. Heaven, I thank thee for this great strength of mine! It will stand me and my friends in good stead yet."

He counted it lucky, too, that Oswald de Burgh had relented, and not added starvation to his other sufferings. He was hungry enough in all conscience, and thirsty; but he promised himself a good long drink at a spring bubbling hard by when darkness fell.

"And now to rest," the giant said, as he climbed higher and wedged his massive frame between the forked branches. "No fear of slumbering, when I must keep my ears open for the notes of a robin, as the good Friar Tuck informed."

The day seemed as though it would never come to an end. The sun lagged on its eastern journey as if at times the earth had ceased to roll, and Little John found it not at all easy to keep awake.

But at last over the wood there fell the silence of coming eve. Swift and straight on the wing the birds flew to their nests. The timid deer stole out from amid the shelter of the bracken, and countless rabbits came out to play.

The corn-crake lifted up its jarring voice, and hushed it as the thrushes sang their night-song, full of passion and pride.

But where was Robin Hood? Would he never come? Had anything happened? Could it be possible that he had been captured and so changed places with Little John in that dreadful dungeon in Nottingham Castle?

When at last the birds slumbered and the stars came out Little John's heart began to sink.

Tortured beyond endurance with thirst, he slid noiselessly to the earth, and was making his way stealthily towards the spring, when a great leathern bottle was thrust into his hand and a jovial voice cried:

"Drink, my son—drink it to the dregs! All is well, and before day dawns we will sup in our cave in Sherwood Forest."

At the same moment Little John heard the twittering of a robin, and then he took Friar Tuck in his arms and squeezed his fat sides until he was fain to try for mercy.

CHAPTER 6
"Ho! the Fighting Friar!"

LONG AFTER THE midnight hour had passed, deep down in Sherwood Forest there broke forth strange echoes—echoes of bursts of laughter, and cries of triumph; but the sky was not reddened with the glare of burning homesteads; for Oswald de Burgh had allowed his passion too full a sway, and now he lay on his bed in a raging fever, and mad with delirium.

So for a time matters went on as usual. Men tilled the soil, and performed the usual work of husbandry. The great, lumbering, wooden-wheeled carts, or wains, laden with produce, rumbled through the beaten tracks.

Armed bands and rangers roved through the glades of the forests, but no rebel forester found they. No man with yard of yew or cross-bow, with stolen fawn slung across his shoulders, or bag of black game depending from his belt.

Yet, despite this peace and quietness Robin Hood and his merry men had not remained idle.

Far from it. Robin's scouts were abroad, continually bringing him news; moreover, a great move was being planned—a move which did not augur well for Oswald de Burgh.

For four days that tyrant lay ill; but his iron constitution saved him, and he left his bed still as morose and savage as ever.

One evening there came riding through the Forest of Sherwood, on his way to Nottingham Castle, Sir Eustace Alleyne, a handsome young knight of Saxon-blood, on his mother's side. His attendant was one Hubert, who loved his master as he loved his life.

Sir Eustace had a sealed packet from the king to deliver to Oswald de Burgh, which he shrewdly guessed contained instructions as to how the foresters were to be treated in the future. Sir Eustace Alleyne and Hubert had ridden almost night and day, but now were in great trouble. They had lost their way in the intricacies of Sherwood Forest.

"Good Hubert," Sir Eustace said, bringing his horse to a standstill. "we have been misdirected. We have wandered far from the direct path."

"I liked not the looks of the man we questioned, Sir Eustace," Hubert replied. "If he has deceived us, we shall find ourselves in sore straits. There be men in these parts, or those who tell the tale lie, as wild and lawless as pagans. It is said that their revels are as unholy as the feasts of ghouls, which tear the dead from their graves and devour them."

"That I'll not believe," Sir Eustace said. "Richard, our lord and king, is not of that opinion, I trow, for if I be not vastly mistaken, this packet from him contains instructions to De Burgh to lighten the grip he has taken on the very men you speak of. But who goes there ahead of us?"

"Good luck. 'Tis a holy friar," Hubert cried. "And, as I live, he is mounted on an ass with an obstinate will of its own. See how it goes from one side of the path to the other, in spite of kicks and buffets."

Sir Eustace put spurs to his horse to overtake the friar; but at that moment the ass broke into so sudden a gallop as to almost throw its rider over its head.

"If you do not abate your speed, monk," cried Sir Eustace, who was now within hearing of the runaway, "I will order my henchman to send an

arrow through your cassock. What fear you? We but ask your help to guide us through the forest."

"Brute!" quoth the friar, tugging at the reins as he addressed the ass, "for miles and miles you have refused 'en to trot, and now you would make it appear that I am afraid of a stripling because he wears chain-armour and carries a sword by his side. Be still, or not a meal shall you have for full forty-eight hours."

The ass seemed to understand, and, not caring to fast so long a time, halted with a jolt that made the friar's teeth chatter in his head.

"Your blessing, holy father," Sir Eustace said.

"Take it for what it is worth, Sir Knight. I am in no mood to bless just now."

"So do I see. But why in so great a haste?"

"The forest of Sherwood has an ill name," the friar replied. "How was I to know that you were not pursuing me? Fear lent me wings, and verily the ass feared something, too, when he heard the hoofs of your galloping horse."

Sir Eustace gazed at the friar in some surprise. He was a stout, burly man, who, old as he was, seemed fitter to wear a suit of mail than cassock and cowl. He sat the tall, lean ass like a trooper.

"By my faith, holy father," said the young knight, "but I should think that fear troubled not your breast very much at any time judging by your stature and those strong limbs."

"I am a man of peace, Sir Knight," the friar replied demurely. "The Holy Church bids me avoid encounter with my fellow-men, and danger, too. I am journeying to my hermitage, which stands on the verge of the forest where, an' you will, I can offer you shelter; for although the sky is bright now, there is a heavy storm lurking under the sunshine. Yet, truly, I have not the means of offering fit entertainment."

"Yet 'twill suffice," Sir Eustace said. "As you say, there is thunder in air, and lightning lurks on the edges of the hurrying clouds. I will accept the shelter you offer."

"And welcome; but look for little more. As for the provender—"

"What!" Sir Eustace interposed, "do you mean to tell me, burly priest, that your huge frame is supported on aught but good living?"

“St. Bartholomew, my patron saint, is good to me,” the friar replied. “Perchance I fare as well on bread and water as did the greedy Israelites on the fleshpots of Egypt.”

The sunlight died away, and a rumble of thunder boomed through the dark.

“Are we near your hermitage?” Sir Eustace demanded.

“This road will lead to it,” the friar replied, turning down an avenue where the trees met overhead, their branches interlacing with each other.

The friar pushed briskly on, followed by Sir Eustace and Hubert. As they reached the end of the avenue a shrill whistle was heard. It was responded to ere the sound had died away.

Then, as if by magic, fully a hundred armed men appeared.

“Villain!” cried Sir Eustace Alleyne angrily, “you shall die for this act of treachery!’

Drawing his sword, he rode full tilt at the friar, who, leaping from the ass, threw off his cassock, revealing a breastplate and armour down to his knees.

“Ho, for Friar Tuck! Ho, the fighting friar!” shouted the men.

Laughing loudly, Friar Tuck received Sir Eustace Alleyne’s sword upon his own and, tempered as the blade was, it splintered like glass. Then the friar gave the knight what sounded no more than a gentle tap; but it rolled him out of the saddle, and, dazed and bewildered, Si Eustace saw his henchman pinned to the ground by two sturdy men and completely overcome.

At the same time he realised that further resistance would be courting death. Fifty cloth-yard shafts were aimed at, him, and he held up his hand as a sign that he submitted.

“Who is the captain of this band of thieves?” he demanded.

Robin Hood stepped forward.

He was now dressed in a green jerkin, with buff belt across, green hose, boots and spurs. In his cap was a heron’s feather, and he was armed with a short double-edged sword, and held a six-foot bow.

“I answer to the name of captain,” he said.

“I am known as Robin Hood; but, Sir Knight, I command no band of thieves.”

"Who, then, are these men?"

"Honest men, weary of the wrongs imposed upon them," Robin Hood replied. "I am King of Sherwood Forest, and you are welcome to my greenwood palace. By my faith, you were rough with good Friar Tuck, who knew that I could entertain you better than himself. But, of a certain, the friar can take his own part in a bout. And now, my guest, who and what are you?"

There was something bold and open in the manner of Robin Hood's speaking that won the young knight's confidence.

"I am Sir Eustace Alleyne," he replied. "My father was a Norman —ay, and a gentleman to boot; my mother was pure Saxon. I am now on my way to Nottingham Castle."

"To Nottingham Castle," repeated Robin Hood, his brow as dark as night. "That tells of your friendship, with my arch-enemy, Oswald de Burgh, the sheriff."

"I know nothing of Oswald de Burgh," Sir Eustace replied. "I am merely the bearer of a message in writing to him."

Robin Hood pricked up his ears at this; but he was too wise to make any comment at the time.

"Whatever may be your mission, you are welcome to Sherwood now. See, your henchman is released, and shall attend you. Follow me. Ho, Little John!"

"I am here!" cried the giant, stepping forward.

"See to the knight's horse, and to that of the henchman," the young archer directed.

Robin Hood now led the way to the middle of the glade, where a great oak with wide-spreading branches stood. A great cloth was spread upon the ground, and an awning suspended from the tree kept off the rain, which was now pelting down in earnest.

It was now dark; but presently a blaze of pinewood torches illumined the whole scene. Then was there a hurrying to and fro among some of the men, and soon the cloth was laid for a repast fit for a king.

There were venison pasties, huge joints of beef, larded fowls, and cakes made by the fair hands of Maid Marian, who, soon after appearing, made her courtesy to the now willing captive knight.

Wine in leather bottles was passed round, and as soon as the horns were filled Robin Hood said:

"Brothers, let us drink to all true men, no matter wherever they may dwell."

"The toast does you credit," Sir Eustace said, after duly honouring it. "And now to taste your venison."

"The venison is the property of King Richard," Robin Hood said. "He needs it not, nor would he grudge it if he knew all. But now, Sir Eustace, I pray you tell me, have you any news of the royal Richard?"

"He is well, and I have it from his own lips that he intends to join the Crusade, and measure his blade against the infidel Saladin. Indeed," he added, growing more communicative, "the Message I bear is from the king himself. See, it is addressed in Richard's bold handwriting; but of its purport, I know nothing."

"It might interest me," said Robin Hood. "Ay, and my merry men, likewise."

"What!" cried Sir Eustace, starting back and crushing his clenched hand over the packet.

"Nay, but I will never part with it while I live. You may kill my body, but my honour shall remain unsullied to the end."

"Fear nothing," came in calm tones from Robin Hood. "In such terms did I speak to try you. I like you all the better for your anger. Had I been in your place, the words you uttered could have been mine. But since I am treating you so fairly, let me make a bargain with you."

"Say on," replied Sir Eustace, who had feared that the packet would be taken from him by force.

"Let one of my men, dressed as your henchman, go in the place of good Hubert to Nottingham Castle," Robin Hood said.

"You ask a strange thing of me," Sir Eustace replied. "Would it not be an act of treachery on my part?"

"Nay, because traitors must be fought with their own weapons."

"I do not understand," Sir Eustace said.

"Wait a little while and you will," Robin Hood replied. "On one thing you may rely. Whatever may come of my follower's visit to the castle, no blame shall be attached to you; I swear it."

"But consider—"

"Consider that I have acted fairly. You were in my power. One blow, one shaft from a bow, would have deprived you of life, and then the packet would have been mine."

"True. I consent."

"That being so, we will dismiss the subject," Robin Hood said. "Now, Sir Eustace, lie down and sleep. Tomorrow Will Scarlet shall attend you to Nottingham Castle, and, if you will, back again to this glade."

Sir Eustace slept soundly enough under the oak in Sherwood Forest, although at times the lightning flared in his face, and the thunder boomed in his ears. But all was bright and fair in the morning, and Sir Eustace and Will Scarlet rode away, the former happy in the possession of a new sword which Robin Hood had given him in place of the blade shivered by Friar Tuck.

On reaching Nottingham Castle, Sir Eustace, after declaring his name and mission, rode into the courtyard, and soon after, with Will Scarlet bearing his sword, after the custom of the period, was admitted into a spacious hall, where Oswald de Burgh, hollow-eyed and haggard, received him.

At De Burgh's back were several armed men. His captain sat on his right, while his scrivener or secretary occupied a place on his left. Sir Eustace placed the packet he had guarded so sacredly on the table; but, before opening it, Oswald de Burgh said:

"Will it please you, Sir Knight, to partake of refreshment?"

"I need none, nor does my henchman," Sir Eustace replied. "My instructions were to receive your answer and return again to London as quickly as possible. For that purpose I have arranged for changes of horse on the road."

"By the rood, that is most unfortunate," De Burgh replied. "I had hoped to see you in the place of honour at my table this night. But, as it cannot be, I will use all dispatch."

As he broke the seal, and took from the packet a small sheet of parchment and glanced at it a change came over face.

The writing on the wrapper was that of King Richard, but the king's letter been abstracted and another written by Prince John put in its place.

This is what Oswald de Burgh, the sheriff, read with greedy and all-devouring eyes:

> "Greeting, I know your loyalty to me and hold it in great respect. My royal brother Richard hastens his preparations for starting to the Holy Land. He may never return, but in any case the kingdom is in my hands until he does. The bearer of this is a meddling knight who suspects and watches me closely. Write a loyal answer to the king, and having delivered it to Sir Eustace Alleyne, send men after him and bid them dispatch him and his henchman. Richard, my brother, will believe that Sir Eustace has failed in his duty and trouble no more about him. Richard favours the foresters, while I would destroy them. Be courteous and careful, taking heed that no word or look shall betray you, for Sir Eustace Alleyne is a man of great discernment, and might on leaving the castle employ an armed escort sufficiently strong to beat back your men. In all this fail not on the pain of displeasing me who will one day wield the sceptre of England."

The contents of this letter nearly deprived Oswald de Burgh of breath; but at the same time the very words under his eyes seemed to dance with joy. Here was a chance he had never dreamed of in his wildest hopes. Not only was fortune smiling on him, but, possessed of this letter, he had Prince John always in his power, for it proved him a traitor to his royal brother Richard.

"I must crave your patience, Sir Knight," De Burgh said. "The letter will require thought before I can frame a fitting answer. In the meantime, let me, again beg that you will taste of the hospitality of the Castle of Nottingham, which is, as you know, a royal residence."

"I heard the king say that he wished it were nearer London, for divers reasons," Sir Eustace remarked. "I pray you hasten with the answer. I have wasted much time on the way; indeed, I lost myself entirely in Sherwood Forest."

“You were in good fortune to pass through without meeting with some of the rebels, growled Oswald de Burgh.

“I met plenty of men, but saw no rebels. Indeed, all I spoke to inquired affectionately after the king.”

There was something in the young knight’s voice that made Oswald de Burgh look up and regard him keenly.

“In an hour all shall be ready,” said the sheriff after a short silence. “I will send your henchman to the buttery, where he can rest and enjoy himself until you have need of him.”

There was nothing unusual in this, but Will Scarlet did not like parting with Sir Eustace. Something told him that all was not well; but, finding that by demurring he might bring trouble, he left Sir Eustace.

An officer conducted the knight, with much ceremony, to an apartment splendidly furnished after the manner of the times. The space admitting light and air were filled with transparent strips of horn, and hung with silken curtains deeply fringed with gold.

“This,” Eustace thought, “is the royal chamber. How is it, then, that I have been brought hither?”

His mind was still filled with wonder when two attendants entered, bearing refreshments and wine. Sir Eustace was in no mood to eat, but he drank a little wine, and, feeling tired, leaned back in a chair and fell asleep.

He was aroused by the entrance of Oswald de Burgh.

“Your pardon,” Sir Eustace cried, leaping to his feet. “I cannot account for this weariness, for I slept well and long last night. And now for the message to the king. I must tarry no longer.”

“Here it is,” Oswald de Burgh replied, holding forth a scroll of parchment secured with a silken cord.

“Farewell, Sir Eustace, and rest you merry. If ever you return to Nottingham Castle, we will not part with you so soon.”

Sir Eustace thanked the sheriff, who watched him with shifty eyes, muttering to himself.

“He has scarcely wetted his lips, and the drug has had but little effect on him.”

IN A FEW MINUTES Sir Eustace and Will Scarlet were riding through Nottingham on the way to the forest.

"Good Robin Hood did the sheriff an injustice by suspecting him," the knight said. "De Burgh was most courteous to me." Will Scarlet made no reply, but nodded his head moodily.

"Come," said Sir Eustace, "we must be fair even to so stern a man as Oswald de Burgh. I confess I like him not; but as I find, so I judge; and so long as a man does me no harm, I have no cause to quarrel with him."

Still not a word from Will Scarlet, and his silence puzzled Sir Eustace-Alleyne. It was a lovely day, and the forest wore its most enchanting aspect; but suddenly a mist gathered before the knight's eyes, and the air darkened.

"A storm is coming on," he said: "let us seek shelter!"

"A storm!" Will Scarlet responded. "Ay faith, there is not a cloud in the sky."

At that moment Sir Eustace pressed his hand to his head and began to reel in the saddle.

"By Heaven!" he gasped. "Robin Hood's suspicions were well founded. I have been drugged. My blood boils, my brain reels! Oh! fool, to drink the wine!"

"Rouse yourself, Sir Eustace!" Will Scarlet cried. "Ride for your life! Keep your senses about you for but a few minutes, and all will be well."

"I cannot. All is over with me. Take the letter to the king, and see that it is delivered to him."

"I will never leave you while I live," Will Scarlet exclaimed, as he caught the knight in his arms. "Robin Hood thought that Oswald de Burgh would find an excuse for detaining you; but the villain sought to destroy you by other means."

Dismounting with great difficulty, with the weight of Sir Eustace still upon him, Will Scarlet dragged him from the saddle, and, placing him at full length upon the grass, chafed his hands and face, but with no result.

"If we had got but a few miles further, all would be well," Will Scarlet aid, stifling a groan. "As it is the best must be made of the worst when a man is in so sore a fix."

His next thought was to take the message to the king from Sir Eustace, and hide it under his tunic. That done, he dragged the unconscious knight into a thicket and covered him with some branches.

Then Will Scarlet stood on guard, guessing that it would not be long ere Oswald de Burgh sent men to finish the work of the drug.

Never did he regret so much not having a bow and quiver full of arrows with him. Thus armed, he would bid defiance to half a dozen men; but his only weapon was his sword and Sir Eustace Alleyne's shield.

As he was tethering the horses, and praying that the effects of the drug might soon pass away, he heard sounds the import of which there was no mistaking.

Sir Oswald de Burgh's men were in pursuit, and coming on at a rapid pace. There followed the jingling of bridles and the gruff voices of the Men came to the forester's ears.

Mercy from such hirelings he could not expect; and even if they did not kill him at once he would surely meet his doom later at Nottingham Castle.

"Heaven send me strength and courage," Will Scarlet said, untethering his own horse and leaping into the saddle. "I'll fight while I can draw breath, and if I fall, it shall be when I cannot strike a blow. Ah! they come!"

A dozen well-armed men, mounted on powerful horses, came into view.

"Where is Sir Eustace Alleyne?" the leader demanded.

"Ahead!" Will Scarlet replied shortly, thinking no shame of missing the truth with such foes. "You have come too late."

"Pshaw!" grunted the Norman. "No man of his quality would ride through the forest unattended. You are hiding him; he sleeps somewhere. Answer, and that quickly, or make your act of contrition."

"Take the answer I gave you," Will Scarlet said. "You'll get none other from me."

"Then you die," the leader roared. "At him, men! Cut him down! We'll find his knightly master without much trouble, I'll warrant."

At this moment one of the troopers' horses took fright, and, rearing and plunging violently, threw the others into confusion.

The leader raved, and the men joined in chorus; but soon the sound was changed into one of dire dismay and agony, for Will Scarlet, taking the bull by the horns, as the saying goes, struck the leader such a mighty blow that ere he reached the ground he was dead.

Amazed at so fierce an onslaught made by one man against such odds, the Normans drew back a few paces, and then, rallying, charged in a body.

Of what followed Will Scarlet never had a true recollection.

It seemed to him that he was in a kind of vortex of steel. Thrown from his horse, he scrambled to his feet and fought on still.

He was like a leaf in a raging tempest, hurled hither and thither, now up, now down, but always fighting—fighting for dear life and sweet liberty.

Suddenly something else happened. A Norman fell upon him; then another went crashing to the ground, and then, as in a delightful dream, he heard the whistle of arrows and the thunder of Little John's voice.

"A rescue! A rescue! Ho! ho! No Normans! Sweet liberty or death!"

Robin Hood and his merry men were coming. They were near. Dazed, bewildered, bruised and more dead than alive, Will Scarlet saw patches of Lincoln green flashing through the trees.

Oh! the joy of it! Oh! the music of those twanging bows; and the savage joy, as the Normans, stricken to death by the shafts, went tumbling from their horses!

Will Scarlet could do nothing now; he was like a child. And as Robin Hood came running up, and, putting his arm round him, cried: "Courage, Will, not a varlet sits his saddle," he fainted like a woman.

When consciousness returned, Maid Marian was bathing his face, and Sir Eustace Alleyne was bending over him.

It was true, then, all deliciously true, and he was in the cave again, surrounded by his friends.

"Dear Will," said Robin Hood, coming to his side and taking his hand, "I thank you more than words can tell. You have played the part of a man whose heart is true and sound to the core. Not only have you saved

the message to the king, but given me a noble recruit. Henceforth Sir Eustace Alleyne will be one of our band."

"Ay, and with all my heart and soul!" Sir Eustace said.

SO ONCE AGAIN was Oswald de Burgh beaten, but it must not be supposed the cruel tyrant had any notion of leaving Robin Hood and his foresters in peace.

On the contrary, he sent out small bands of armed men, with larger bands for them to fall back upon, in the hope of drawing Robin Hood into the open, but the outlaw was too wary to be caught with such chaff as that.

Day by day scouts of the King of Sherwood brought him in news of what was transpiring beyond the borders of the forest and in the town.

And then, early one morning, there was brought to Robin Hood, where he encamped some distance from his stronghold, a messenger from Oswald de Burgh. The man was clad in armour, mounted on a fine charger, and he waved a white scarf as a sign that he came on a peaceful errand.

What that errand was needed little explaining. De Burgh had sent to demand the surrender of Robin Hood and his band.

Robin flushed hotly under the insult, then gave his answer in cold, fearless words.

"Hasten back to Nottingham Castle," said he, "and tell your master, Oswald de Burgh, that I am King of Sherwood Forest, that my subjects are loyal and true, and more, that I will never rest until I have made him repent sorely of his cruelties."

"And that is your answer?" asked the knight in armour.

"Surely it is plain enough," Robin Hood replied. "What more would you have? Shall I threaten to hang Oswald de Burgh over the gates of the castle? Yes, you may tell him that, and what is more, I intend to keep my word, unless the sheriff, fearing my vengeance, takes his own life. Away! and be assured that I am but making a short halt here, so treachery will avail you nothing. Come again in an hour, and you will find us gone."

The man in armour wheeled round, and, setting spurs to his horse, disappeared amid the trees.

“And now,” said Little John, “we must go deeper into the forest.”

“Where De Burgh will not dare to come, even with a thousand steel-clad warriors at his back. I have sworn to destroy him, and I will keep my vow.”

So said the bold Robin Hood.